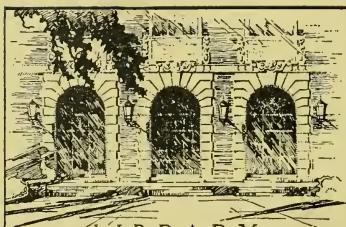


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VANDALIA, ILL.--HIS-
TORICAL SOCIETY

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF
JOSEPH CHARLES BURTSCHI

(1962)



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ILLINOIS HISTORICAL SURVEY





BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH
of
JOSEPH CHARLES BURTSCHI

Published by
The Vandalia Historical Society
Vandalia, Illinois

1962

Joseph Charles Burtschi (August 15, 1874—April 22, 1962), financier, mayor, titleman, banker, author, and president emeritus of The Vandalia Historical Society, was the youngest son of Daniel and Franceska Woegtli Burtschi, Swiss emigrants who settled in Vandalia, Illinois, in 1865. He was born in the second story of a frame building located two doors east of the Farmers and Merchants Bank on Gallatin Street. A reproduction of the house (it is the small frame dwelling at the extreme left) appears on the John Matthew Heller's capital mural in the Hotel Evans dining room. In his early years he was hampered and embarrassed by poverty. Left in straitened circumstances by her husband's death in 1881, his mother labored at gardening to support her six sons, Oswald, Theodore, Julius, Martin, Daniel, and Joseph. Joseph's early boyhood was spent in Vandalia, where he attended the local schools until he reached the fifth grade. When he quit school through economic necessity, he helped his widowed mother earn a livelihood by tending and selling vegetables from the garden.

He served as a clerk in the Yost Confectionery and later in the Seaman Drug Store, where his duties were to open the place at seven in the morning and to close it at nine in the evening as well as to clerk and to perform janitor services. His salary was ten dollars a month. Moreover, he managed at various times to help John Marty build a fence for which service he earned fifty cents a day.

The salary at the drug store proving inadequate to necessities, he turned to the study of bookkeeping. His brother Julius, an apprentice for Attorney E. M. Ashcraft, opened a real estate office after Mr. Ashcraft had removed to Chicago. Joseph's preference was for a line of professional work which would insure him eventually a reputation as well as an income. He bought a bookkeeper's manual, studied it diligently, and handled the clerical work for Julius. In this job he earned seventeen dollars a month from which salary he was able to save three dollars a month.

When Julius Burtschi began to build houses to sell, Joseph turned to the insurance business. On December 8, 1894, he wrote his first policy. Then his brother added the real estate loan business to his office; subsequently Joseph engaged in examining titles to land. Soon he became a member of the firm known as Burtschi Bros. & Co., which has remained its title to this day. When his brother moved to Decatur, Joseph became the sole owner and chief executive of the firm.

Joseph Burtschi soon earned a considerable reputation as a friend to the local farmers who borrowed money to finance their agricultural pursuits and as a competent title examiner. His integrity and industry soon gained him a reputation that he steadily maintained. Thorough, cautious, and conscientious, he studied titles, and his successful efforts confirmed the faith of his clients.

In 1901 he married Elizabeth Cahill, who died in 1902. To that union a son Robert Leo was born. The woman who shared in his enterprises as a life partner was Olivia Pauline Yoos, whom he married in Effingham, Illinois, on June 6, 1905. She was a devoted



OLIVIA BURTSCHI



JOSEPH C. BURTSCHI

and efficient homemaker who helped him to succeed in both his social activities and his business enterprises. To that union three daughters, namely, Regina Mary, Josephine Frances, and Mary Pauline, were born. His wife died May 18, 1959.

As a member of the Mother of Dolors Catholic Church, he participated in many fund-raising drives and sang in the choir. He was a charter member of the Knights of Columbus, which was organized in Effingham, Illinois, in 1902. When a small altar boy, he was given the figures of a manger scene made in Germany that had outlived their usefulness in the church. The century-old creche he cherished, and although the figures were wobbly and worn, the little scene held an important place under his Christmas tree each year.

Despite the fact that he was busy working for his young family, Joseph Burtschi developed a love of reading that gave him most of his limited education. His keen interest in reading turned to accumulating a library for which he gathered collections of books illustrative of the best writers.

Later in life he became an avid collector of old books; some of the volumes in his library date back to 1787.

In 1913 a group of lawyers, concerned about the preservation of the old capitol, spearheaded a movement to sell it to the state. Various plans were in execution to avoid the demolition of the mellow brick building, but nothing definite was accomplished until Rep-

representative Arthur Roe suggested that Joseph C. Burtschi be appointed to negotiate with the state. In 1918 as a real estate agent Joseph Burtschi went to Springfield, the capital of Illinois, to sell the Vandalia Statehouse, capitol of Illinois from 1836-1839, to the state. He sold it to Governor Lowden for \$60,000. Dr. Harry Pratt, state historian, quipped, "The building cost Vandalia \$16,000. Joe Burtschi shrewdly managed to get \$60,000 for it. Was ever such maneuvering accomplished by Abe Lincoln?"

Joseph Burtschi possessed the elements that make a community-minded man. He took an interest in local affairs and an especially active part in the trying struggles of managing the town government. Although he was a staunch Republican, he took no active part in the state or national scene. He acquired his political tenets early in life and adhered to them consistently. In 1919 he was elected mayor and for the next two terms was strongly solicited to be a candidate for re-election. He served as mayor for six years during which time he manifested his generosity to the city in a succession of munificent gifts. The street sprinkler and the city hall furniture were those on which he expended his public salary. During his service as mayor he built an electric light plant, paved roads, rebuilt the water works providing a filtration plant, assisted in establishing the public library, expended time and effort improving both the state and city cemeteries, and at the close of six years left the following administration a surplus of \$20,000. When he became mayor he found outstanding warrants issued and unpaid and taxation money spent. Displaying a business-like instinct for detail and fidelity to his fellow-workers, he administered the city government in a remarkably successful manner.

In 1920 a group of Vandalia Woman's Club members attempted to establish a public library. This development deeply concerned the mayor, being a man self-educated through reading. Since the mayor had accumulated a sizable library of his own, he felt that his fellowmen in less fortunate circumstances ought to be offered such an advantage. He concentrated his efforts on this project, and as mayor set aside \$2500 to help establish a public library in the city. It is now considered one of the outstanding reference libraries (it contains the famous Henry Rankin collection) on Lincolniana in the United States. Throughout his life he continued to identify himself with this important project. In 1922 he appointed the first members of the library board and the first council member to serve on it. The latter member was Harry B. Craycroft, his faithful friend and prominent civic leader. Joseph Burtschi took an active part in influencing Charles A. Evans, another dear friend and outstanding community leader, to donate a library building to Vandalia. At the breaking-ground ceremonies Joseph Burtschi (he was eighty-five years old) spoke as president emeritus of the Vandalia Historical Society.

One important service during his administration as mayor, however, was not achieved as chief magistrate. As a real estate agent he sold to the state of Illinois the acreage which later became the Illinois State Penal Farm, which is located two and a half miles

north of Vandalia. In 1928 he served as president of the Vandalia Chamber of Commerce, of which he was a charter member, at the unveiling of the Madonna of the Trail Statue, for which he staged the great pageant "East Meets West." He devoted much time to civic affairs, joining heartily and vigorously in celebrating centennials, anniversaries, Memorial Day, and Lincoln's Birthday. Likewise, he did much to insure the success of these undertakings as mayor, president, or chairman. Moreover, his enthusiastic support was often coupled with a contribution to the fund for such projects.

Besides his business and civic affairs, Joseph Burtschi found time for his favorite recreations. As a young man he was a croquet enthusiast, a duplicate whist fan, and in his later years he enjoyed horseback riding. Furthermore, he was an ardent fisherman on his farm where he had built an artificial lake. At various times he owned farms, operated by tenants; farming supplemented his professional income and provided recreation as well.

In the 1920's as a bank director, he labored for a reorganized system in the Farmers and Merchants Bank that would serve the community more efficiently. He advocated improved financial measures. In 1935 the directors appointed him president of the bank in which capacity he served for eighteen years, continuing the management of his real estate and abstract office while engaged as a banker.

The Vandalia Cemetery Association was incorporated September 29, 1927. At the first meeting Joseph Burtschi became president and served in that capacity until 1937. On March 25, 1947 he was elected secretary-treasurer. He remained in that office until his death. He made numerous trips to Springfield in 1949 to confer with Governor Adlai Stevenson concerning the maintenance of the Old State Burial Ground and the South Hill Cemetery, which contained the monument of the five legislators who died in the capital. House Bill No. 58 was approved April 28, 1949. A state appropriation of \$10,000 was secured for the maintenance, improvement, and care of both cemeteries. The association voted to place the money in a trust fund at Joseph Burtschi's discretion. On Memorial Day, 1952, four statues sculptured in Italy, were unveiled in the South Hill Cemetery. Vandalia citizens who were interested in the once Imperial City of Illinois donated the statuary of enduring Italian marble. A Memorial Day parade and ceremonies were held at the dedication. In the prepared speech by Adlai Stevenson, the governor paid tribute to Vandalia's historian:

"Of Vandalia's contribution to Lincoln's development it has been said by your distinguished fellow townsman, Joseph C. Burtschi, 'Vandalia nurtured him when his mind and soul were growing up. It surrounded him with strong men who were his friends and men who tested his fighting ability. It sent him out, after six years, not the youth who came to the seat of government, but a man ready to cope with the problems of a troubled nation.'"

At the outbreak of World War II Joseph Burtschi served as chairman of the Red Cross, applying his business knowledge to the

raising of funds. During these troublesome days his patriotic service was characterized by both ability and devotion to his country. As chairman of the Fayette County War Chest, he conceived the idea of organizing a committee for a county-wide drive for a war chest fund that would take care of all the demands rather than operating a drive separately for the Red Cross, Salvation Army, United Service Organization, and Chinese relief. His plan was so successful that it was studied by leaders from other counties.

Many honors were awarded to Joseph Burtschi as a titleman and as an insurance agent. He served one year (1923-1924) as president of the Illinois Title Association. For several years preceding his death he was honored as the oldest charter member of that organization. A testimonial banquet honoring his fiftieth year in business was tendered him on November 16, 1944, by insurance companies represented in his office. At the banquet which was held at Hotel Evans, Joseph Burtschi was presented a wrist watch bearing an inscription from all the companies and a testimonial certificate in recognition of his fifty years of service with the Insurance Company of North America.

In 1946 he collaborated with Lester O. Schriver in the writing of *Lincoln and Vandalia*, a monograph of thirty-six pages. It is a bracing tonic to those interested in Lincoln's association with Vandalia. The sketches of original buildings, places, and paintings create a dramatic touch, and the information rescues from oblivion Vandalia's important role in shaping the prairie lawyer into a statesman of international fame.

At the age of seventy-nine Joseph Burtschi still retained in a remarkable degree his strength and mental power, attempting a new organization—the Vandalia Historical Society. His ability and experience assured his position as first president of the society. In February, 1954, he called a meeting to organize. In October, 1954, the Illinois State Historical Society planned to meet in Vandalia with Joseph Burtschi as general chairman. To the members he planned to give a volume on Vandalia's history which he termed "a gift book"—a documentary history of Vandalia during the capital days. With his characteristic energy, he set about the performance of this task. He had been compiling research on Vandalia history for the preceding fifteen years. The herculean task was to organize it into a volume for publication by October, 1954. Indeed the exertion was so severe that it pressed heavily on him health-wise, and as a result he was unable to attend the two-day meetings. Later when people viewed the volume, it was with amazement that an octogenarian had written it. Mr. Burtschi would retort, "I oppose stubbornly any move to put an old man to pasture. It would be better for all of us if we followed Tennyson's philosophy:

Old age hath yet his honor and his toil
Death closes all; but something ere the end
Some work of noble note, may yet be done.

Noble is not the word for my work. Useful would best describe my book."

With the assistance of Harry E. Pratt, state historian, he brought together as fine a collection of source material as was ever accumulated for the twenty-year period of Vandalia's capital days. In order to publish the history, he asked the Chamber of Commerce for financial aid to which request the public-spirited citizens complied. The work appeared in one volume of ninety-four pages under the title of **Documentary History of Vandalia, Illinois**. The larger portion included documentary material but a minor part included articles on the National Road, transportation, James Hall, and nomenclature. Ever a zealous advocate of learning the history of Illinois, the editor hoped that students would find the volume useful.

For many years Joseph Burtschi had contemplated writing a history of Vandalia, and as far back as 1940 he had begun to collect materials for it, always questioning his own ability to carry through such an ambitious undertaking. The Lincoln story he relegated to the background and dealt principally with material little known about Vandalia's beginning. He performed this labor with his accustomed industry and thoroughness. He asked only two people to contribute original material to the volume. One was Theodore Kircher, a graduate of the law school of Yale University, who wrote on the nomenclature of the Okaw. The other was his daughter Mary, a graduate of the University of Illinois and an admirer of Vandalia's first writer, James Hall.

At the same time that the gift book was published, a mural depicting Vandalia as the capital in 1836 was presented to public view. Impressed with Joseph Burtschi's persistence in research, Charles Akin Evans consented to assign the painting of a mural to John Matthew Heller of St. Louis. With the aid of Joseph Burtschi's excellent research and investigation into drawings made during the capital period, the artist was able to reproduce an authentic mural, distinctive and admirable, on the north wall of the dining room of Hotel Evans. Joseph Burtschi was instrumental in making possible the mural, but Charles Evans took upon himself the financial burden of the enterprise.

Joseph Burtschi won and retained high regard for community work by all who knew him. Numerous plaques exist showing the recognition of the value of his services. One was given to him by the city officials for his service as mayor, one from the Illinois Title Association in recognition of his presidency, and one from the Illinois State Historical Society and Vandalia Historical Society in recognition of his work in advancing, spreading, and popularizing an interest in Illinois and Vandalia history.

His last important public service was performed as president emeritus of the Vandalia Historical Society where he continued to promote interest in Vandalia history. His dominant spirit permeated the activity of the society as shown by the fact that he aided in preparing the Lincoln sesquicentennial program for the Vandalia group whose members published a special program booklet for 1958-59. Similarly, Governor William Stratton honored him by appointing him a member of the Lincoln Sesquicentennial Committee of Illinois. A tribute to Reverend Roscoe Coen, the Presby-

terian minister who was a vital inspiration to the Vandalia Historical Society, was given by Joseph Burtschi at the September, 1958, meeting. At the dedication program for the Evans Library December 20, 1960, he spoke as president emeritus of the Vandalia Historical Society.

In the summer of 1961 Miss Helen Barr, adviser of the Vandalois, the yearbook of Vandalia's high school, asked him to pose with his book in the Statehouse where students gathered around him. The experience of being honored as the town historian proved to him that his volume was meaningful to students. The theme implied in the Vandalois for 1962 is the effect of Vandalia's old and new heritage upon the young generation. People are often unaware of man's interdependence that each is needed by another and so little realize the unconscious influence of one person upon another. The subtle suggestion in Emerson's quotation from "Each and All", which appears in the beginning of the annual, blends the soft solemnity of the old heritage with the quickening pace of the new. Vandalia's traditions will not be forgotten if each lends his thinking to "make a place in the future for our heritage." To the historian it was a triumph to be a part of such a distinguished yearbook.

At Christmas, 1961, he presented his daughter Josephine with two rare books *Letters from Illinois* (1818) by Morris Birkbeck and *Statistics of the West* (1836) by James Hall. He felt that Vandalia people ought to possess books written by authors who had lived at one time in the capital. The last material read by Joseph Burtschi before he suffered the cerebral hemorrhage on March 17, 1962, was a letter from Lester O. Schriver. In it his co-author of *Lincoln and Vandalia* expressed how much he had cherished Mr. Burtschi's friendship and co-operation in historical research. "I feel much better since I've read this letter" he commented to his daughter Josephine. Within a few hours he suffered the attack and remained in a partially unconscious state. Five weeks later he succumbed on Easter Sunday morning.

The community leader was interred in the South Hill Cemetery on the family lot located under a majestic, aged oak tree, an ancient monarch of capital days. On the lot are buried his parents, grandfather, his wife, a daughter, and two sisters-in-law. Etched in his stone marker is the simple record of his birth and death dates. Surviving him were his two daughters, Josephine and Mary, his son, Leo, and his grandchildren, Elizabeth Burtschi Stedelin and Linda Burtschi, and a great-grandchild, Elizabeth Stedelin.

Joseph Burtschi spent his entire life in Vandalia to which town he remained a loyal citizen. He thoroughly enjoyed the business activity in the community. He alluded to himself as a poor boy who had to get along on his own. As a result, he was eager to help others who were in unfortunate circumstances. He was very happy, too, when he succeeded in transferring his own interest in Vandalia's history to others in the state. Such was Joseph Burtschi, who contributed his talents, energy, and good will to a town which has reserved a niche for him in its history.

PROGRAM

JOINT MEMORIAL SERVICE

Old State Capitol
Vandalia Ill.

November 5, 1962 7:30 p. m.

Joseph C. Burtschi
1874-1962

H. B. Craycroft
1885-1962

Invocation - - - The Rev. Ralph G. Smith, Pastor
First Presbyterian Church

Resolution - - - - Mrs. Ben Perkins, Secretary
Vandalia Historical Society

Resolution - - - - Mr. Andrew White, Secretary
Vandalia Chamber of Commerce

Respects to
Mr. Joseph C. Burtschi - - - Mr. Irving W. Dilliard
Past President, Illinois Historical Society
Collinsville, Illinois

Respects to
Mr. H. B. Craycroft - - - - Mr. Les Sanders
Secretary-Manager, Illinois Automotive Trade Association
Springfield, Illinois

Remarks - - - - Mr. Coral H. Brooks, President
Farmers and Merchants Bank

Remarks - - - - Mr. Robert O. Hasler, President
Vandalia Chamber of Commerce

Remarks - - - - - Mr. H. E. Rogier, President
First National Bank

Benediction - - - - - Rev. Francis Gribbin
Mother of Dolors Catholic Church

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